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## ABSTRACT

The shaping of positive attitudes toward the inclusion of children with disabilities is an important aspect of the education of university students preparing to become teachers in regular education. This study examined: (1) components of university student attitudes toward inclusion requests; (2) whether attitudes toward inclusion varied by disability; and (3) the effects of three types of preservice teacher training experiences on attitudes toward inclusion. The results indicated that types of academic preparation appear to have an impact on attitudes of students in teacher preparation programs. Students (N=23) who participated in a practicum expressed more positive attitudes towards inclusion than students (N=59) who completed only an overview course or students (N=100) who completed a self study program. Results also suggested that attitudes towards inclusion are significantly different depending on the nature of a child's disability. The most negative attitudes were expressed towards students with seizure disorders. (Contains 15 references.) (Author/ND)

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## Attitudes of Preservice Teachers 1

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Attitudes of Preservice Teachers Toward Students with  
Disabilities: Do Practicum Experiences Make a Difference?  
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Abstract

The shaping of positive attitudes toward the inclusion of children with disabilities is an important aspect of the education of university students preparing to become teachers in regular education. This study examined: (a) components of university student attitudes toward inclusion requests, (b) whether attitudes toward inclusion varied by disability, and (c) the effects of three types of preservice teacher training experiences on attitudes toward inclusion. The results indicate that type of academic preparation appears to have an impact on attitudes of students in teacher preparation programs. Students who participated in a practicum expressed more positive attitudes towards inclusion than students who completed only an overview course or self study program. The results suggest that student attitudes towards inclusion are significantly different depending on the nature of a child's disability. The most negative attitudes were expressed towards students with seizure disorders.

Attitudes of Preservice Teachers Toward Students with Disabilities:  
Do Practicum Experiences Make a Difference?

Introduction

Since the passage of the Education for all Handicapped Children Act of 1975, students with disabilities have entered general education classrooms in increasing numbers. It is evident that legislative mandates alone cannot be expected to bring about a genuine inclusion of children with disabilities into general education classrooms. The attitudes of regular education teachers are a critical factor in determining whether children with disabilities are truly welcomed and integrated into classroom settings or whether the mere letter of the law is followed. Until recently, general education teachers have had relatively little formal preparation for working with students with disabilities. As a result, it is not surprising that many have responded negatively to requests to include children with disabilities into their classrooms (Boucher, 1981; Knoff, 1985; Jamieson, 1984). Concern over the willingness of classroom teachers to accommodate the needs of children with disabilities has been cited by many educational researchers (Schumm & Vaughn, 1991; Braaten, Kauffman, Braaten, Polsgrove & Nelson, 1988).

Despite the changing face of special education service delivery, the majority of states have not modified certification requirements for the preparation of teachers in integrated settings (Ganschow, Weber & Davis, 1984; Kearney & Durand, 1992; National Association of State Boards of Education [NASBE], 1992; Reiff, Evans, & Cass, 1991). Although universities do offer coursework at the preservice level specific to the education of students with disabilities, such training efforts typically consist of a single overview course in special education that emphasizes general characteristics of students in each "disability category" (Fender & Fiedler, 1990; Hoover, 1986; NASBE, 1992; Reiff et al. 1991). Several researchers have noted that teacher training programs should emphasize the development of positive attitudes toward the education of learners with special needs as well as the development

of knowledge of characteristics (Fender & Fiedler, 1990; Hoover, 1986; Simpson, Whelan, R., & Zabel, 1993).

Attitudes toward disability can be regarded as developmental in nature and there is evidence that they can be influenced (Shotlem, Iano & McGettigan, 1972). Whereas, it is evident that the shaping of positive attitudes toward children with disabilities is a critical aspect of teacher preparation, necessary information about the attitudes of preservice regular educators is not yet sufficient to design effective curricula. Research demonstrates that attitudes toward inclusion are often negative; however, not enough is known about these attitudes. Although attitudes toward inclusion are complex, they have often been studied as a global factor (Eichinger, Rizzo, & Sirotnik, 1991). Many important questions remain unanswered. For example, are there specific disabilities that elicit relatively more negative attitudes from educators facing accommodation requests? What aspects of inclusion requests elicit negative responses? Is it that the requests are seen as too difficult to accomplish? Or is it that these requests are seen as unfair? The answers to these questions have implications for the development of curriculum for teacher preparation programs. Furthermore, there is also a paucity of information on the effects of preservice training experiences on attitudes toward the inclusion of students with specific disabilities. For example, it would be important to learn whether or not students in standard courses on exceptional children differ in specific attitudes from those who have had additional "hands on" experiences.

This study grew out of the investigators' interest in beginning to answer these questions as a foundation for more effectively preparing regular educators to willingly include children with disabilities into their classrooms and activities. The purpose of this study was threefold. First, it examined factors which might have a bearing on the attitudes of students toward inclusion requests such as the perceived fairness and feasibility of such requests. Second, it examined whether students respond to inclusion requests for most disabilities in a global manner or whether there are

specific disabilities to which they respond more negatively. Third, it evaluated the effects of three different types of preservice training experiences on attitudes toward inclusion: (a) a self study program which prepares students to pass a special education competency test, (b) an overview course on students with disabilities, and (c) a guided practicum experience.

#### Method

##### Subjects

Three groups of subjects consisted of students enrolled in a large comprehensive teacher education program located in rural Western Pennsylvania. Group A included 59 sophomore, junior or senior students who had just completed a three credit course designed to survey the characteristics of children with disabilities and to indicate methods and considerations for inclusion of those children in the regular classroom. Group B consisted of 100 sophomore, junior, senior or graduate students who elected to fulfill a special education competency requirement by studying independently and taking a 150 item multiple choice competency exam. Group C consisted of 23 senior students who participated in a project during their student teaching experiences which was designed to provide knowledge, skills, and hands-on, practicum experiences to meet the needs of children at risk for educational failure. Students in group C had previously completed either the course or competency test and then participated in one of two practica experiences during student teaching: (a) as members of an instructional support team that provided prereferral support to individual children, or (b) as members of a student teaching team which cotaught a unit of instruction to a classroom of elementary children including both regular and identified special education pupils.

##### Instrument

A survey was designed to assess attitudes toward requests to include children with disabilities into regular class settings. This survey consisted of 10 vignettes, each which described a student with a different disability. Diagnostic labels were not used; rather the vignettes described behavioral

characteristics and instructional accommodations. These vignettes were developed by the co-investigators and reviewed by four professors in special education and rehabilitation for accuracy and content validity. Each vignette was followed by four questions which elicited student opinions on how they would feel about a request to include the student described in the vignette into a regular education classroom. A 5-point Likert scale was used for each of the four questions in order to assess student reaction to the inclusion request. They were asked to rate the extent to which a request for inclusion was:

(a) fair versus unfair, (b) easy to accomplish versus difficult to accomplish, (c) the extent to which they would welcome the inclusion versus refer the child for alternate placement, and (d) the extent to which they felt confident versus anxious about the request. This question format was consistent for each of the 10 vignettes in order to examine the manner in which attitudes varied according to disability condition. The disabilities described were: orthopedic, visual, speech, hearing, behavior, autism, fine motor control, mental retardation, learning disability, and seizure.

#### Procedure

Students volunteered to complete the questionnaire at the conclusion of their educational experience. One of the authors described the purpose of the study to students involved in each of the curriculum delivery practices to solicit their participation in the study.

Group A students responded to the questionnaire in class during the last week of the course. Of 77 possible students, a sample of 59 responded to the questionnaire. All students in attendance on the day that we administered the questionnaire completed the questionnaire. Group B students completed the questionnaire following completion of the competency exam administered during final exam week. There were 238 students registered to take this exam during one of three administrations during this semester. These 100 students are representative of the students who take this examination at this university. Students were asked and volunteered to respond to this questionnaire following

the last of the three administrations. Group C subjects completed the questionnaire during the final team meeting of the project near the end of the student teaching semester. All project students completed the questionnaire.

### Results

Figures 1-4 present the mean scores for: (a) the subject groups for each attitude component (Figure 1), (b) subject groups for disability condition (Figure 2), and (c) each attitude component for disability condition (Figures 3 and 4).

A 3 x 10 x 4 multivariate repeated measure analysis of variance using Wilks Lambda as the multivariate test criterion revealed three Main effects: (a) type of preservice training experience [ $F_{(2, 179)} = 10.11, p < .001$ ], (b) attitude components [ $F_{(3, 177)} = 18.25, p < .001$ ], and (c) disability conditions [ $F_{(9, 171)} = 14.78, p < .001$ ]. In addition, the following interactions were significant: (a) academic preparation x attitude components [ $F_{(6, 354)} = 2.29, p < .05$ ], (b) academic preparation x disability condition [ $F_{(18, 342)} = 1.68, p < .05$ ], and (c) attitude component x disability condition [ $F_{(27, 153)} = 17.63, p < .001$ ]. A three-way interaction (academic preparation x attitude components x disability) was not significant.

### Discussion

Several findings emerged from this study that have implications for undergraduate teacher preparation programs. First, the results indicate that type of academic preparation appears to have an impact on attitudes of students in teacher preparation programs. Students who participated in a guided practicum expressed significantly more positive attitudes (than students who only completed a course or self study program) toward including students with disabilities into regular classroom settings. The results indicated that the students in the practicum condition were consistently more positive about including students with each of ten different disabilities. It is important to note that the attitudes of the students in the self study program and the overview course were very similar to each other.

The positive effects guided practicum experiences can have on attitudes



are consistent with outcomes in other studies which suggested that contact with youth with disabilities is a particularly influential variable in shaping positive attitudes toward inclusion (Eichenger, et al., 1991; Giangreco, Dennis, Cloninger, Edelman, & Schattman, 1993). Previous research indicates, however, that under unfavorable conditions contact can also result in the shaping of negative attitudes (Shotlem, et al., 1972). Therefore, contact in the context of a planned systematic intervention would be most desirable.

The second major finding of this study is that the results suggest that students' attitudes toward inclusion are significantly different depending on the nature of a child's disability. Of the 10 disability conditions described, students in all three groups were most positive about including children with orthopedic disabilities which require wheelchair use into the classroom. The prospect of including a child with a seizure disorder into the regular classroom elicited the most negative attitudes from students in the practicum, self study program and the overview course. Children with behavior disorders elicited the second most negative attitudes from students in all three groups.

The extent to which attitudes varied by disability was striking and the rank order of preferences by disability was quite consistent in the practicum, self study program and overview course groups. Although, the practicum group was most positive about each disability category, they demonstrated the same pattern of preferences. (See Table 1 for a rank ordering of preferences).

Table 1

Rank Order of Disabilities from Most to Least Positive Attitudes

Rank Order	Disability	Mean Response
1	Orthopedic Disorder	1.46
2	Learning Disability	2.20
3	Deafness	2.23
4	Visual Disorder	2.25
5	Mental Retardation	2.26
6	Fine Motor Control	2.41
7	Autism	2.44
8	Speech Disorder	2.48
9	Behavior Disorder	2.70
10	Seizure Disorder	3.17

The third major finding was that, despite method of student preparation, preservice student responses were generally welcoming of the opportunity for inclusion and regarded inclusion as fair. With the exception of attitudes toward the inclusion of children with seizure disorders and those with behavior disorders, students' expressed attitudes were generally above the midpoint on the 5-point scale (with 5 being most positive). The least positive component of the attitudes of students in each of the three groups pertained to the extent to which they felt requests were feasible to accomplish.

This study has some factors which limit the extent to which these findings can be generalized. Because it was based on self report of attitudes, it is difficult to ascertain how closely their responses would correlate with actual behavior. However, Fuchs, Fuchs, & Stecker (1989) found that similar self report of attitudes toward inclusion did correlate well with verifiable data. In addition, our sample was limited to a relatively

restricted geographic region.

However, with these cautions in mind, the findings have implications for preservice training programs. The positive effects of practicum experience on attitudes toward inclusion suggests that this is a potentially fruitful approach for training regular educators to work with students with disabilities. The emphasis on methods, which is typically emphasized in this type of practicum experience, also has the potential to address students' relatively greatest concern about inclusion (feasibility of accommodations). In addition to an increased emphasis on practicum experiences and feasible methods, it appears that preservice training experiences may need to focus more closely on seizure disorders and behavior disorder in order to realize the goals of inclusion.

As teacher educators, we need to carefully examine our students' knowledge and skills as they prepare to teach this nation's children and youth; however, we must also acknowledge the critical role that attitudes play in the development of teachers. Furthermore, we must configure coursework and field experiences, all the while investigating the nature and influence of attitudes in teacher development.

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Figure 1. Mean scores of groups by attitude

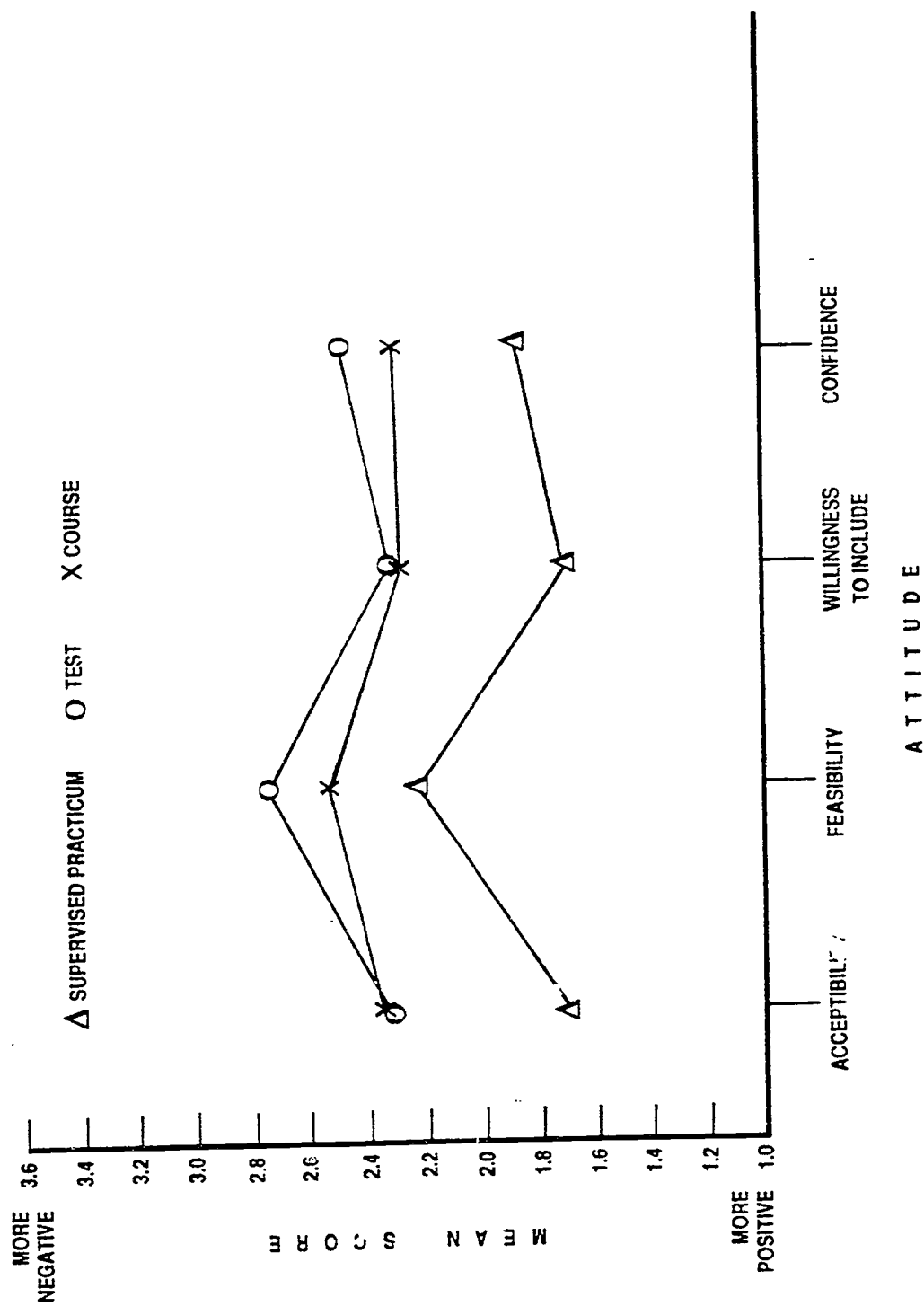


Figure 2. Mean scores of groups by disability type

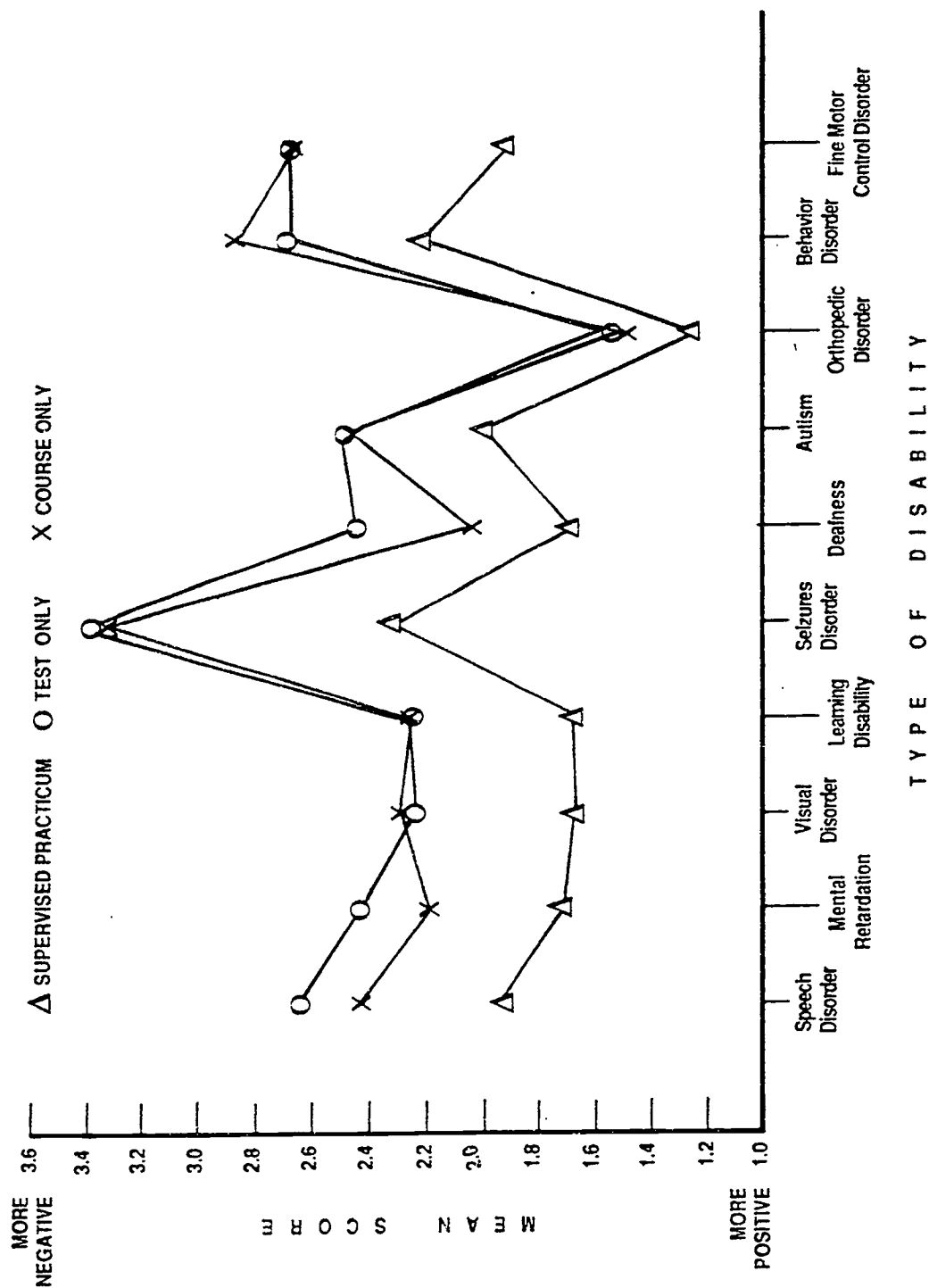


Figure 3. Mean scores of responses to disability by attitude

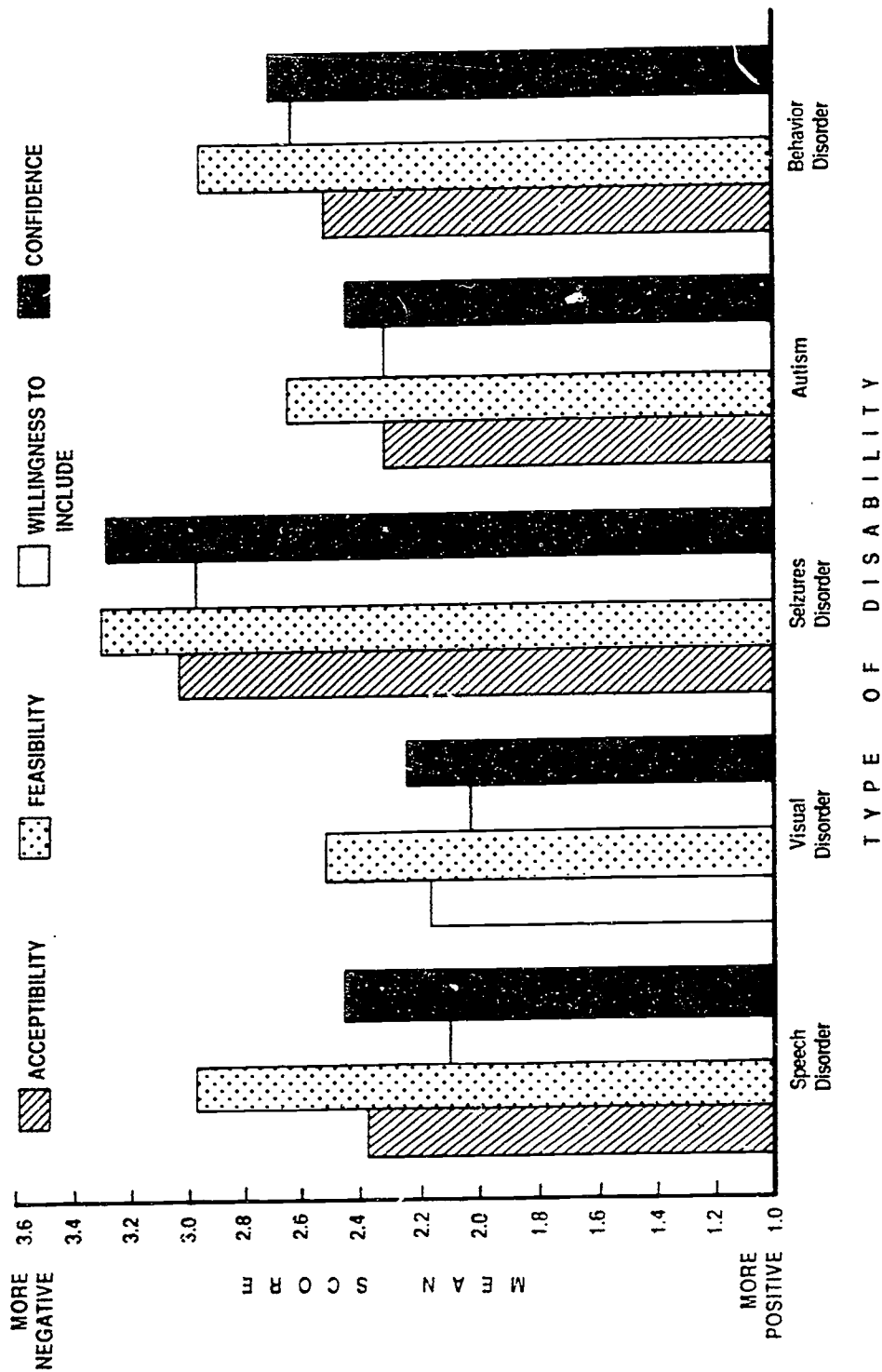




Figure 4. Mean scores of responses to disability by attitude

